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DEVELOPING CRITICAL READING POWER THROUGH NEWSPAPER READING.

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DESCRIPTORS- READING SKILLS, TEACHING METHODS, *CRITICAL READING, READING INSTRUCTION, *SECONDARY SCHOOLS, JERSEY CITY STATE COLLEGE,

A METHOD OF DEVELOPING CRITICAL READING POWER BY ANALYZING ADVERTISEMENTS, CARTOONS, EDITORIALS, AND CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES FOUND IN NEWSPAPERS IS DESCRIBED. SPECIFIC EXAMPLES OF TEACHING PROCEDURES ARE GIVEN. IT IS SUGGESTED THAT A WIDE RANGE OF NEWSPAPERS BE USED SO THAT THE DIFFERENT VIEWPOINTS EXPRESSED IN COLUMNS, EDITORIALS, AND POLITICAL NEWS AND THE UNWARRANTED EDITORIALIZING IN STRAIGHT NEWS STORIES CAN BE DETECTED. CRITICAL READING IS CONSIDERED A THREE-LEVEL PROCESS--COMPREHENSION, INTERPRETATION, AND EVALUATION. IT IS POINTED OUT THAT NOT ALL NEWSPAPER ARTICLES ARE SUITABLE FOR DEVELOPING CRITICAL READING POWER AND THAT THE NEWSPAPER IS NOT GOOD MATERIAL FOR REMEDIAL READING. (RH)

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III COMPREHENSION SKILLS - SECONDARY
FRIDAY, MAY 5. 9:00 - 10:30 A.M.

My favorite way to start developing critical reading power through newspapers is with a careful consideration of the claims made in advertising. Let us look at a few examples to see several of the things which can be done to stimulate thinking about what has been read in the ad.

BEGIN BY ANALYZING THE ADS

Here is a simple beginning with a typical newspaper ad:

INTRODUCING OUR JENNY LIND COLLECTION
EARLY AMERICAN ELEGANCE IN LAMPS
$24.88 to $35.88
Regularly $32.50 to $44.95

"How do you read this ad?" can be the opening question. Differing interpretations will get the discussion going - and you are started. Does this mean that the lamps were Formerly priced at the higher figures and are Now Reduced? That may be the impression some uncritical readers get, and that may be the one the ad writer wishes to create. But

the ad does not say that the lamps have been marked down, and we readers would be well advised to consider the "regularly" as mere "sales talk" - if not purposefully misleading.

Also in the same category is "usually." Other words to be wary of are these two: (1) "manufacturer's list price", for it is a misleading price to be marked down from (2) "special bargain" has little value. While "special purchase" may indicate a real sale with savings, "specially priced" has little validity. From this study of the meaning of words in varying situations it is an easy step to the fascinating fabrications of the realm of Semantics. This can be an enjoyable and revealing excursion.

Now what about this ad?

STIR, PUREE, GRATE, CHOP,
MIX, BLEND, LIQUEFY
This 5 cup Oster blender has 8 recipe tested speeds
You get 4 bowls at no extra charge
SALE $39.88 reduced from $49.88

Questions: Believable? Reasonable reduction? Verifiable?

Thinking: The original or standard price can be easily checked ÷ at another store. The reduction is probably less than the usual mark-up, the difference between the store's purchase price and their selling price, and is therefore believable.

There are complications, however, when we read about

a toaster reduced from $13.99 to $10.99 when no brand name is given in the ad and when we cannot check the stated original price. And moving from the relatively simple to the more complex, we read an ad on a much higher priced article:

MINK JACKETS
SALE-PRICED TOMORROW
$400 $500 $600

"With every fur you receive a guarantee regardless of price. We'll replace and repair skins that wear out through natural causes for two whole years from date of purchase. We'll refund your money in full for any reason at all up to six weeks from date of purchase."

Here there are a number of facets to intelligent buying with the aid of critical reading, critical thinking. After need has been determined, "I can afford it" decided, then comparative shopping must be done. The critical reading problem involves untangling terminology such as Natural Cerulean, Bleached White Mink, Natural Blue Mink, Silverblue, Natural Pastel, Autumn Haze, Ranch; dyed, let-out, etc. The critical reading problem continues with this question: What does the guarantee mean in terms of your protection? What does it mean to you and does it mean the same thing to the advertisor? Interpret "natural causes". Does this mean ordinary? daily? double? or normal wear? What does "wear out" mean? Does this mean

completely worn out or worn through or easily visible or somewhat ragged or shabby or what? Can it be both "replace and repair" or must it be "replace or repair", and who decides? Here there is plenty of room for close reading and closer reasoning.

By design I would not talk about the refund aspect of the guarantee, waiting for a student to mention that this ought to be discussed. But if I did not get the question from the group, I would raise it myself.

Exploring the meaning of guarantee as it relates to mink jackets furnishes the opportunity to expand the discussion into guarantees in general. A few which can optionally be used are these: tires - pro-rated rebate on a new tire; automobiles - 2 years or 24,000 miles and 5 years or 50,000 miles, if serviced and certified; refrigerators - 1, 2, 5 years on the freezing mechanism only or on all parts, or parts And service; life-time guarantees on mufflers, watches, pens; T-V picture tubes - parts plus service in the home only or in the shop also. What are the inclusions and the exclusions? Just exactly what does the guarantee cover and just as important what does it not cover? Here you have to be decidedly probing and precise in your thinking.

THE 3-C AND THE 3-D WAYS

Thus it can be seen that a critical reading of the ads is not quite as simple as it seems at first glance. To protect our own best interests, we must be able to distinguish the good ad from the poor, the better ad from the bad, and the best from the misleading. This demands both penetration and reservation. Much intellectual penetration and more mental reservation. My further recommendation is that every reader use the 3-C and the 3-D ways of Critical Reading, Critical Decoding. The 3 C's are Careful, Circumspect, and Critical. Careful means cautious, thorough; circumspect means considering all sides; critical means involving skillful judgement as to truth and merit. All these are dictionary definitions. The 3 D's are Decode, Dissect, and Discount; decode the advertising jargon, dissect minutely the terminology, and discount the claims.

Armed with a mental sword having the blade of keen penetration and the handle of substantial reservation, protected by the breast-plate of 3-C and the buckler of 3-D - with all these on your side, you are ready to engage in an interesting and challenging "battle of wits" with the ad writers. Be advised that they are sharp and that you, too, will need to be. Be sharp - stainless steel sharp - and cut your cost of living. With a little practice in this critical reading

skill you can "eat higher on the hog" and "live beyond your means" - without landing in jail.*

If better living were indeed to be the outcome, then I agree with The Wall Street Journal, "The best thing that ever happened to an advertising program: a creative (critical) reader."

* This could be strong motivation and activate almost all the students.

CARTOONS: THE MORE MANAGEABLE MATERIAL

Assuming you have reluctant readers and you are looking for easier and more manageable material, why not try starting with cartoons? Regular cartoons, better known as "the funnies", could be a point of departure from which you could then go on to editorial cartoons. Ask the students to point out the absurdities, the incongruities, which they see in such 3-4 panel cartoons as Nancy, Ferdinand, Donald Duck, and such others as The Girls, Big George, plus Grin and Bear It.

Several examples will suffice. Nancy and two of her friends are at Ski School, and the instructor appears on the scene with his arm in a sling, bandages around his head and left leg, and he is using a crutch as a ski pole. He says, "Now for the first lesson." Now if the students make application - even current and localized - of the main thrust of the cartoon, be prepared to concede the truth in

whatever degree it exists. Some of us do teach writing but do not write well. Some of us do teach reading without doing too much of it. And let's not talk about speaking - or listening. Are we teachers good listeners in our classes?

Ferdinand is paddling up the river in a birch-bark canoe, and he is passed by an Indian going down stream in a rowboat propelled by an outboard motor. (Title the cartoon "Curriculum"?) Donald Duck, stranded on a tropical island, sees a huge wooden, packing crate float up to his little island refuge. His unpacking reveals a compact auto from which he removes the tires and on which he builds a raft. The last panel shows Donald paddling away - to home presumably. (Whither, Education?) Two women, passing a taxi stand, say "Since our husbands want us to economize this year, why don't we just walk the five blocks to the hat shop? (Fill in your own title.) In a school room a mother, accompanied by her son, is saying. "I don't see why Junior is a problem, Miss Finch! Good grades are due to heredity and bad ones to poor teaching." (_____)

EDITORIAL CARTOONS AS TRANSITIONALS

These cartoons would of course be fun, but they would also be mild, intellectual gymnastics for flexing somewhat flabby mental muscles. They could be introductory to editorial cartoons, which demand a more mature type of interpretation. Let me try to describe one of those in a few

sentences. One is a picture of a hallway showing several doors with names on them and 1968. One door has Nixon's name on it, and outside is a pair of spiked running shoes. The next door down the hall has what appears to be Romney's name and a pair of shoes - not spiked. Further down the hall is an indistinct name and a pair of loafers. Here are a few subleties - to challenge the mind.

A second editorial cartoon is a drawing of an auto speeding down the highway with two passengers, Mr. Taxpayer and Mr. Economy. They have just passed over a road-wide wire which leads up to a timing device and a motorcycle policeman named Income Tax Hike standing behind a billboard labled Prices. "I think you slowed down just in time" says Mr. Taxpayer. Some knowledge of rising prices and inflationary pressures is needed here - to stimulate thinking.

"Then High School, College, Marriage, Vietnam..." says the father to the mother, pointing to the baby in the crib. With this situation most high school students can identify - and react.

Editorial cartoons, not side by side with an editorial, are intermediate ("funnies" first) to editorials and commentaries by columnists. A suggested way is to start with an editorial which has a cartoon to accompany it, probably on the same page. Discuss the cartoon first and then the

editorial.

Seated at a desk is a man labled "Congress" holding a report entitled "President's Plan to Finance Educational and Non-Commercial TV". Another man standing beside the desk is urging, "Why not? After all, we're dealing with a disaster area!" The editorial is called For Better TV and offers comments on a number of points: shortcomings of commercial TV, excise tax on new TV sets, diverting income from satellite relay of commercial TV, how spend the limited funds of $9 million, and freedom from government interference. Even if there is agreement that there should be more educational and non-commercial TV, there is obviously plenty about which the students can read critically and react. Read and react. Read and think. These are the key processes.

THE CRITICAL READING CONCEPT

And isn't this what we want when we try to develop critical reading power? Don't we want the students to weigh and consider, to reflect on, to line up the pros and cons, to assess the value of the arguments and reasons, to assay the fine metal in the ore, to determine the strong and weak points of the exposition, and - to use a homely figure of speech from sports - to run up a box score of the runs, hits and errors? This, then, brings me to my major premise:

Reading is Thinking, and Critical Reading is Critical Thinking. A companion basic idea, if not a corollary, is that teaching must result in student thinking, i.e. Teaching is Student Thinking.

Now it will be easy to "get students going" on another companion cartoon and editorial, for it is about Adam CLayton Powell. Here the teacher's problem will be to keep the discussion on the track and to slow it down so that it can be looked at thoughtfully and thoroughly, completely and deeply. Here the teacher's problem will be to keep down the heat and friction and to turn on the light, enlightment, and tolerance. A difficult and monumental task. One possible way is to use a wide range of different newspapers so that several editorials, a number of columnists, and many points of view are represented and available. This will constitute a real test of critical reading, critical thinking by the students, and a stern test of masterful teaching. It is here that the teacher must be a superb example of a rational appraisal of all the facts and all the arguments given on both sides of the question.

But do not try one as difficult as the Powell discussion is bound to be until after you have done a number of others on less emotionally charged areas, ideas, or persons. Both the teacher and the students need practice before they plunge. Here you will have to feel your way and be sensitive

to the stage of development of the ability of your group to discuss subjects more rationally than passionately. Perhaps California's Clark Kerr represents a good intermediate step between Educational TV and Powell.

The Powell controversy had its center in the East, whereas the Dr. Clark Kerr case had its origin in the University of California. Both cases, however, became national and international. Both are fine but difficult material for students practicing the art of critical reading and thinking. The student has to function in reading on at least three different (but not necessarily distinct) levels: He must first comprehend, then interpret, and finally evaluate. Any reader must first understand what has been said; secondly, he must be able to interpret its significance; and then evaluate its importance. Without this depth of three-fold reading, a student cannot be said to be reading critically. And he must have the patience to learn how. This will entail a great deal of practice-from day to day and over an extended period of time and on many kinds of materials.

OTHER ELIGIBLE MATERIAL

What are some of these materials, over and beyond the ads, the cartoons, the editorials, columns, controversial issues and persons? Several present themselves immediately: political news, the sports pages — particularly sports editorials and columns, certain kinds of news articles and stories in which there is an admixture of straight, strict reporting coupled with unwarranted editorializing, feature and human interest stories, and certain special, syndicated features and columns.

Most certainly the student must be exposed to the two (or more) sides of the political news, to a Republican and a Democratic newspaper, to a Conservative and a Liberal point of view, to the sports pages, editorials, and columns of more than one newspaper, The student must be taught how to detect editorializing and the intrusion of opinion into news items, where they do not belong. He must have repeated practice in discovering it for and by himself. To better understand illicit editorializing the student might try his hand at writing an opinion-filled news story. Human interest and feature news stories can be evaluated against a background of "hard news". The syndicated columns and special features offer golden opportunities for critical reading.

UNSUITABLE MATERIAL

So all of the newspaper can be used for developing critical reading power? No, for there is plenty of material not suitable.* For instance, statistics on the stock market, temperatures, business and finance - except where conclusions are drawn from them. Certain factual material such as the president's birthday, $200,000 gift to a library, etc. need not be evaluated. Straight news articles, especially smaller and less important items, need not concern us too greatly. And there are numerous parts of any newspaper which are purely enjoyable: most sports results, magazine section, women's pages, theatre and TV and the whole Entertainment World, the beautiful color effects, the humor, and many others which you can fill in individually. Let's not take the fun out of newspaper reading.

There is a considerable amount of material which need not be read - for lack of interest or importance - and which each reader will determine for himself. This will give us the time to pay attention to those news stories, editorials, and

*May I interpose here a caution: in my opinion and based on more than 20 years experience teaching it, the newspaper does not constitute good material for Remedial Reading.

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and columns which warrant our time and thinking. These can easily keep us busy developing critical reading power.

USE PLENTY OF EXAMPLES AND DISCUSSION

While this learning the art of reading critically and creatively is going on - with its daily ups and downs, its monthly progress and regressions - the teacher must practice patience. He must have understanding and insight, give opportunities for reactions and encouragement to thinking, and be exemplary. In fact, and in the final analysis, the teacher may have only two major functions to perform in terms of Developing Critical Reading Power; namely, exemplification and discussion. Set the example - many, many times, and give all the students time to talk - plenty of time to discuss. With these two fists - if I am permitted a figure of speech - a strong teacher (male or female) can knock out "Knuckle-Head", the non-critical reader.